CHAPTER 4

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The Influencer Economy

CHASING LIKES

For me, the Internet has always been inextricable from labor. Life online is an admixture of work and entertainment, very often both at once—which is predictable given that the Internet evolved to commodify the culture that emerged on it. Even before I went to college, social media was a marker of adult professionalism: in the summer of 2006, you could get on Facebook only once you had a college email address from whichever school you were going to attend, something accepted students didn't receive until the summer before their freshman year. So when I finally got a Facebook account, it was primarily a space for networking, getting to know the other students who were going to be part of my class at Tufts University. We quickly formed a Facebook group for the graduating class of 2010, which seemed at that point far in the future. We listed our hometowns, debated what we wanted to major in, and planned IRL meetups. Because of our shared affiliation, the social network had brought us together in advance, in a digital space—a form of social organization that felt rare at the time, merging the Internet and life offline. One very consequential life event emerged from that Facebook group: it was where I first interacted with my partner, Jess, and we began messaging about our shared taste in music.

During my junior year of college, the Internet also provided some of my first opportunities for paid work in the field I wanted to make a career in: writing. I had contributed reviews of art exhibitions to the *Tufts Daily* newspaper, and I joined Twitter in 2008, when the platform was more like a sparsely populated café than a roaring stadium. Then as now, Twitter's most addicted user base is journalists, who can't help but tweet the way wolves can't help but howl. Twitter gave me my first exposure to the media industry and the nascent world of online publishing. (Elon Musk may have changed Twitter's official name to X in 2023, but the original is far too set in my mind.)

Meanwhile, *The Atlantic*, which was still primarily a print magazine at the time, had recently launched themed blogs on its website, covering broad areas like culture and politics. Though individual writers including Ta-Nehisi Coates maintained themed blogs of their own to gather their thoughts on specific subjects, these verticals published many different writers, including freelance contributors. The freelancers tended to be emerging young writers, since they had to be willing to write for online-only media and hungry enough to accept very low fees. A friend at Tufts who had interned for *The Atlantic* one summer introduced me to an editor, and she accepted a few of my pitches. They were little arguments about cultural news and trends, what would now be called "hot takes," since they were based more on ephemeral opinion than on reporting or research. For *The Atlantic*, I wrote about why one singer-songwriter was better than another; later I weighed in on the gender symbolism of tote bags for the *The Guardian*, collected artworks that had gone viral for *Vice*, and extolled the benefits of online friendship for *The New Republic*. The pieces lived and died quickly, some sparking discussion in Facebook or Twitter feeds and others sinking without a trace.

Looking back on this early archive doesn't exactly fill me with pride, but it was what the digital ecosystem of the time demanded. Readers like hot takes because they're voicey and provide an opinion against which one can shape one's own; editors and writers appreciate them, too, because they're fast to write, cheap to commission, and easy to publish online. If you worked fast enough, you could go from zero to published in an afternoon. For these I was paid a pitiable but still-desired fee, in the low hundreds of dollars (*The Atlantic* started out at fifty dollars). The way twentieth-century writers must have felt about seeing their very first piece run in print, it was a thrill to

have my byline appear in pixels under *The Atlantic*'s digital banner and in its signature typeface. It gave the text an authority that I didn't know it could have when I was drafting it in a Word document alone in the living room of my student apartment in Boston. (Digital spaces evoke memories just like Proust's madeleine: as I write this, I'm getting a whiff of the still, hot summer air, the bright sun, and the stiff cushions of the IKEA couch where I wrote and edited my first stories.) Of course, I also shared my articles on Twitter, where I followed a nascent crowd who were mostly engaged with the art world. It was my first brush with the constant contemporary labor of online self-promotion. Not only did you have to publish something; you had to market the piece and yourself at the same time.

Popularity contests are a perennial feature of culture. (In prehistory, surely there were cave paintings that were hyped up more than others and inspired Neanderthal queues, one viewer at a time.) Collectors of ancient Chinese painting habitually added their names to favored paintings by stamping them with seals—akin to an approving tweet or a thumbs-up like. Masterpieces acquired bunches of stamps over centuries, with some even layered on top of the painted landscape itself. In Western art, an elaborate frame with an insignia around a painting might speak to its importance, as would a bestseller-list label on a book or an album "going platinum"—all symbols of a high cultural value, or at least a high economic appraisal. These signals have always guided what consumers are likely to consume and thus appreciate. The bestseller label, for example, might encourage a shopper to give a book a second glance or flip to the first page. Artists have always had to be marketers of a sort, evolving public personas that served as calling cards for their work, as Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol did. The difference today is that in Filterworld, the metrics—the number of likes, the preexisting attention—tend to speak louder than the piece of culture itself. Not only do they act as a measure of success, but they create success, because they dictate what is recommended to and seen by audiences in the first place. It's as if a Chinese artist in the twelfth century had to acquire a large enough number of stamps before he could show his work.

I quickly learned to judge my success on the Internet almost

solely in terms of numbers, which proliferated in the early stages of mainstream social media. The number of thumbs-ups on a Facebook post or Tweet was a representation of how many people it reached, how many people were inspired to click a button by your little self-promotional bulletin or opinionated missive. But was that a representation of a post's quality? Should we evaluate ourselves by this arbitrary new metric? The questions loomed, but given the utility of new social networks and the instant reach they afforded, it was easy to ignore such quandaries and just keep posting.

Suddenly, users could tell how every little piece of content compared to every other one. The numbers could not be escaped, popping up next to everything you read or watched. Even if the count of likes, shares, retweets, or faves was an artificial measure of value imposed by the platform itself, they still became the fastest and easiest way to judge what popped up in the infinite feeds of content. More was always better: if a YouTube video had a lot of views, perhaps it might be insightful or at least funny. Virality equaled quality—other people liked this, so you will, too. For creators, whether writers or aspiring Instagram influencers, metrics were the goal, the incentive, and the internal compass evaluating what worked and what didn't. Particularly in journalism, the higher the numbers, the more important something seemed to be. It was a truism: more likes meant more people had seen something. Each like was a vote in the seemingly meritocratic Internet, where anyone could upload content but certainly not everyone could inspire audiences to pay attention.

The law of virality—likes as an indication to the algorithm that specific content deserved more promotion—was particularly relevant for the early days of digital media. Publications' websites began to add shortcut buttons near the headlines of stories to share an article on Facebook, Twitter, and a proliferating list of other platforms. Then the buttons were updated to have their own tiny numbers, showing how many likes or retweets an article had gotten even before the reader had encountered its contents. Likes became the currency of the Internet, and journalists were forced to chase them. (Not that we needed much encouragement to do so.)

As a writer, I closely monitored the clicks on my articles. I was

proud when my stories netted more likes than others'. When I tweeted links or shared my stories on Facebook, I noticed which posts got the most responses. The most successful tended to be the stories that impacted readers' personal lives or crystallized a complaint or problem they were having. When I made authoritative or dramatic statements, the reaction was dramatic in turn. I would recruit friends and colleagues via our always-on Gchat windows to prime my success by liking something right when it went up. It was a relief, years later, when these buttons fell out of favor and the visible numbers disappeared from article pages. But every time I have published an article over the past decade, I have fretted over just how many people were hitting Like and Retweet. I could try to game the system and be aware of which approaches might create extra engagement on social media, but ultimately the result was out of my control.

The tyranny of likes is in part a function of the algorithmic ecosystem we exist in online. Each button press is another data signal to be absorbed, a small sign that you're paying attention to a piece of content that can then be used to train machine-learning systems to serve you more of that thing. Computers don't track our eye movements—at least not yet—and so buttons like the thumbs-up or emoji reactions serve as a proxy for our reaction to content. These are convenient shortcuts for self-expression but also, inevitably, provide more grist for the mill of targeted advertising. We participate in our own surveillance by signaling our preferences so publicly.

It wasn't just articles that were measured by likes. So were Instagram selfies, Facebook status updates about vacations or weddings, and Medium blog posts announcing new business ventures. Medium, a minimalist blogging platform launched by a cofounder of Twitter in 2012, at one point adopted "claps" as its governing metric. Users could press a button to clap for a piece and click it as many times as they were inclined to—up to fifty claps. For a time, the number of claps also dictated the fees that Medium paid to writers who used its platform, a literal equation of likes to value. Over time, a kind of inflation of likes occurred. Each one had less and less value. By 2020, hitting Like on something wasn't so much a sign that you enjoyed it as just that you had perceived it—it had broken through the overall

noise of the Internet. It was common for journalists to put a proviso in their social media bios reading "Likes don't equal endorsements" to guard against misinterpretation. Though you don't always press the Like button because you actually enjoy a post, liking is the only function available to you.

Every social media user has an innate sense of what will get liked. As with classical beauty or geometric proportion, the formula is inexact and yet always identifiable. Provocation inspires likes, since the like is a gesture of allegiance and agreement, a symbol of whether the user is on the side of the troll or the trolled. Outrage gets likes because the likes signal sympathetic outrage: You are mad, too, because how could anyone not be? Hence a common format of post claiming that not enough people are talking about a given subject: a war, a disaster, a bad policy, a bad person. The ignorance alone is an outrage! Sex gets likes, for reasons that don't require explaining. The politician Ted Cruz's Twitter account once liked a pornographic video, a lusty act that was blamed on a staffer. (In 2015, one article offered a warning in the headline: "A PSA for Dudes: Everyone Can See You Liking Teen Girls' Bikini Pics on Instagram.")

Then there are more acceptable emotions used to elicit likes. Humor plays well, both because you like the joke and because you want to pass it along to others, so sharing begets more sharing. Relatability works because it allows the widest possible audience across social media to recognize themselves in something. Relatable content includes eating habits, complaints about your own laziness, and common childhood experiences. ("Did you ever . . . ?") I once tweeted, "sorry I responded late to your email I was unjustifiably terrified of opening it," a momentary reflection on my own inbox anxiety. The line was neither particularly funny nor eloquent, but nearly 150,000 people liked it—by liking it, they were saying it themselves, in a way. A writer friend habitually saved her most banal observations to tweet on weekends, on the basis that it was then when audiences were looking for something particularly relatable. It often worked, regularly netting tens of thousands of likes. Finally, recognizability, in the sense of nostalgia or familiarity, is perfect for driving likes and engagement. You like because you know what

something is; you are more likely to like a clip of a TV show that you've seen many times before than a clip of one you haven't seen, which would require sitting through the video and evaluating it.

These like-inspiring emotions are some of our basest human instincts, which makes sense because they also must occur in the space of an instant, before we continue scrolling. There is no room here for ambiguity, subtlety, or unsurety—you can't hit a button to show that you're still mulling something over, that you haven't come to any easy conclusions yet. Absolutes are the order of the day. Twitter has long been the feistiest arena on social media, where the action boils down to a daily contest for likes. Perhaps it's because the space is so minimal—only a few sentences at a time—and the methods of interaction so limited: retweet, like, reply, ignore. In ancient Roman gladiatorial contests, the emperor dictated the loser's fate with a hand gesture, thumbs up for a death sentence and thumb pressed down to the fist for mercy. On Twitter, the assembled users fill the metaphorical colosseum, and we're all raising our hands in real time to pass judgment with our likes. (Facebook still uses a thumbs-up icon, though it no longer means death.) We like someone's broadside against another person because we agree with the critique. We like a smart rejoinder—a "dunk"—because we agree with the person being critiqued. And each action is reinforced by the algorithmic feed, distributed to others to decide their own judgments.

The tyranny of likes is so complete that in 2016 the artist Nick DeMarco, who was part of an Internet art scene in the early 2010s, came up with a game called "0 Likes on Instagram." It was a Dadaist reversal of the usual rules of social media: instead of posting the most attractive, compelling photo, you had to post as neutral an image as possible. It couldn't even be ugly, since that would receive too much of a reaction, or your followers might like it ironically. "The game is deceptively simple yet infinitely complex," DeMarco wrote in a set of official rules. I tried it myself at the time; it was even harder when Instagram was smaller and you knew a few friends would certainly see your posts, before the feed was too algorithmic and occupied by too many accounts from brands and strangers. Total mundanity worked best, like an off-kilter photo of the sidewalk or a random wall. Sometimes I could get a single like, but never

the true goal of none. DeMarco proposed an alternative of posting with a friend over the course of a day and trying to get the lowest number of likes overall, like golf strokes: "A winner is determined by whoever has the fewest likes at the point when the competitors split up." It's an amusing quest, but it also underlines the extent to which all activity on the Internet is driven toward the goal of more and more likes.

I got on Twitter in 2008 because I saw a news story that an American student studying abroad had been jailed in Egypt and had used the site to alert his family. I was about to study abroad in China, so I figured it might prove useful. It did, but not for so dramatic a reason. It kept me in touch with what my friends back home were doing, and the nascent online art world. For a long time, Twitter remained a segmented part of my life, a constant professional water cooler that filled my days with ambient chatter, a role that might have been filled by office colleagues for a non-freelancer. Something shifted over time, however; Twitter seemed to occupy an increasing amount of psychic space, to both play host to and drive the cultural discussions of the day. The 2016 election of Donald Trump, a hyperactive Twitter user, as president was likely the turning point. Not only were algorithmic feeds becoming more pervasive, but social networks became host to the parallel public-opinion battles of "the resistance," the loose liberal coalition against Trump that adopted, to an extent, the right's predilection for online trolling. Trump's use of Twitter, until he was banned in 2021 after the Capitol riot, only intensified its presence: the algorithmic feed ensured as many users as possible saw his tweets, even if they hated their originator. Twitter didn't just contain the news; it *was* the news.

The platform's gravity inexorably shaped what and how I wrote. As I used it to promote my writing and test out my ideas to see how audiences responded, I learned the mechanics of what worked and what fell flat. Authoritative statements hit, as did one-liner jokes and provocative arguments on any side of an issue. We Twitter users of the mid-2010s developed an argot of references and shorthands that shaped the platform's real-time discourse. During my peak periods of usage, when an idea came into my mind, it arrived subconsciously made for Twitter, restricted to a hypothetical 280 characters. I was

no longer aware of the translation between thought and tweet; my brain had been completely trained on the dopamine hits of social media attention, like Pavlov's dog salivating at the ringing of a bell.

The likes were not the only reward; they existed in a wider online attention economy that bled into the offline economy at large. Likes lead to attention. Attention leads to new followers; followers who liked and shared my work in turn. More followers led to a veneer of personal authority: I was a voice to listen to in my field, a writer worth looking out for. And that reputation got me commissions from editors, part-time gigs, and full-time jobs, which drove me back to the beginning of that loop. Getting more likes felt like what I was supposed to be doing; it felt like work, and I was getting better at my job.

Beyond the social media presences of individual people, businesses and cultural productions had to attract likes, too. A fashion brand might measure its success in Instagram likes, because more likes meant more customer engagement and potential buyers. Accounts made for new movies or television shows would likewise be oriented toward likes, because they were a measurement of marketing success: if you could get more followers for the account of the *Twilight* sequel *New Moon*, then more fans were excited for it and the debut would attract more viewers. Such is the pressure to be likable, optimizing for the appropriate algorithmic feedback.

This is not a new pressure; it's basic human psychology to want to be liked, and we ultimately like what is most similar to us, the same way that mirroring another person's body language in conversation can make you appear more convincing or empathetic. Likability binds society together with the shared incentive to not offend or alienate. Yet interpersonal likability has not been a common metric of culture, particularly the kind of innovative art we have prized over the past century or two. Art itself—not to mention artists as people—tends not to be bound by the quest for likability, and yet likes are what the current tyranny of quantification prioritizes most. In Filterworld, what is likable succeeds and what is not likable is doomed to fail, particularly in any arena of culture where audiences are requisite for survival. And because our American cultural landscape is almost entirely subservient to capitalism, that means more or less all of it.

THE EMPTINESS OF ALGORITHMIC CULTURE

In 2021, Martin Scorsese, creator of films both artistically and commercially successful, published an essay in *Harper's*, a magazine better known for hosting niche literary criticism than acting as a stage for world-famous directors. In the essay, Scorsese recounted his personal appreciation for Fellini, the mid-century Italian director of sprawling, grandiose productions, but he also took the opportunity to decry the state of contemporary cinema. In the era of streaming video, films had been flattened into the category of "content," Scorsese wrote. Content "became a business term for all moving images: a David Lean movie, a cat video, a Super Bowl commercial, a superhero sequel, a series episode." Scorsese goes on to describe the architecture of our cultural ecosystem—the content that we consume is being filtered by algorithmic recommendations, which operate based on what we've already seen and the subject matter or genre of the content at hand. "Algorithms, by definition, are based on calculations that treat the viewer as a consumer and nothing else," he wrote. There is only one way to interact with content: ingest it and like it.

That blanket category of content and the algorithmic prioritization of familiarity has undermined the medium of film, Scorsese argued: "The cinema has always been much more than content, and it always will be." What gets lost is the deeper art form of cinema, the medium that changed his life and the lives of so many others, the aesthetic and even moral challenges that come through the silver screen. Watching great movies was not always comfortable; the experience went beyond banal consumption and aspired to interrogating social norms and enabling viewers to discover new senses of self.

Scorsese used the example of Fellini's films as the opposite of digestible content and the pinnacle of filmmaking as art. Fellini's 1963 film *8½* is the pinnacle of the director's oeuvre for Scorsese,

a fragmentary, self-referential meditation on the life of an artist. Scorsese described the moment the movie debuted: "People argued over it endlessly: the effect was that dramatic. We each had our own interpretation, and we would sit up till all hours talking about the film—every scene, every second. Of course, we never settled on a definite interpretation." It was so strange and unfamiliar that Scorsese had to digest it slowly, incorporating its influence into his own later movies. The paranoia that I hear in Scorsese's essay is that the art of the twenty-first century no longer holds up to such scrutiny. Instead, it's cheap and ephemeral, wafting through your life without leaving any discernible mark. (The passion of his writing shows just how much Scorsese was marked by Fellini, an impact that he was still processing six decades later.) That may be because to fit into digital feeds, in order to attract those pernicious likes and further promote itself as much as possible, culture has to be content first and art second—if at all.

Scorsese's complaints can be chalked up to his position as an elder statesman of his medium; some may even find his position retrograde. The world has changed since his youth; he no longer needs to think about what is new, because his reputation and level of access mean he can create whatever he wants. But others shared his sense of ennui and anxiety, echoing Scorsese's lament that something about algorithmic recommendations has robbed culture of its innate meaning. In an interview with NPR, the producer Barry Diller commented, "These streaming services have been making something they call 'movies.' They ain't movies. They are some weird algorithmic processes that has created things that last 100 minutes or so." "Much of culture now has the hollow, vacant feeling of having been made by algorithm," wrote the critic Dean Kissick, one of the more incisive commentators on contemporary culture, in 2021. "Algorithmic" has become a byword for anything that feels too slick, too reductive, or too optimized for attracting attention: a combination of high production values with little concern for fundamental content.

I feel that emptiness, too. By the late 2010s and early 2020s, it seemed as though many cultural forms—books, TV shows, movies, music, and visual art—primarily existed to garner ephemeral attention and populate the endless app feeds. Nothing stuck in the

way that a masterpiece that will be revisited decades hence sticks. For me, a major signal came from the style of painting that became popular in the art world, with young artists netting huge prices from galleries and auctions. In 2014, the art critic and painter Walter Robinson coined the term "zombie formalism" to describe it. Zombie formalism was abstract expressionism shorn of its emotion and grandeur, with canvases of mushy brushstrokes or cold monochromes from the likes of Oscar Murillo and Jacob Kassay. The critic Jerry Saltz echoed that it was "look-alike art." Their tendency toward the meaninglessly decorative led the way to a slew of painters depicting glossy surrealist scenes, like Emily Mae Smith's paintings of anthropomorphized broomsticks. (Dean Kissick labeled it "zombie figuration.")

These were paintings adapted for Instagram, which was also where collectors increasingly tended to discover and buy them (often without seeing the art in person), mediated yet again by algorithmic recommendations. They could resell it frictionlessly on the same platforms as easily as resharing a post. In 2014, the infamous appropriation artist Richard Prince shortcut the process and produced a series of "paintings" that were actually printed replicas of found Instagram posts, which sold for prices up to $100,000.

Part of the fear of algorithmically driven art is the obviation of the artist: If viable art can be created or curated by computer, what is the point of the humans producing it? An artist like Mike Winkelmann, known by his alias Beeple, built up over two million followers on Instagram with his slapdash CGI cartoons, but that success required posting every day and rarely rising above the intellectual level of a thirteen-year-old boy. (Early in the 2021 boom for nonfungible tokens, Beeple artwork sold at Christie's for $69 million, both a joke and an entirely serious demonstration of popularity.) It's easy to worry about your own looming obsolescence as a creator. But consumers are equally affected.

In a 2022 essay, Jeremy Larson, an editor at the music magazine *Pitchfork*, complained that the algorithmic experience of listening to music on Spotify was getting in the way of the music itself. "Even though it has all the music I've ever wanted, none of it feels necessarily rewarding, emotional, or personal," Larson wrote. Though

the artists' intentions may not have changed, "music becomes an advertisement for the streaming service, and the more time and attention you give it, the more it benefits the tech company." The platform becomes a filter, and sometimes a barrier, for the listener's relationship to the artist and their work. And not every artist allows the streaming service to broadcast their music in the first place. Musicians like Neil Young and Joni Mitchell have removed their catalogs from Spotify to protest some of the company's decisions, including funding podcasts that promulgate political and cultural conspiracy theories. It took years to negotiate digital rights for Aaliyah's catalog of music; it wasn't available on Spotify until 2021. The musicians' absence makes them harder to access and perhaps easier for a Spotify subscriber to forget about—or never discover in the first place—since the service encompasses so much of its users' listening habits. Its recommendation algorithms would fail to promote Aaliyah, Young, or Mitchell even if a listener might like them because Spotify can't profit from the listen. It passively limits how we perceive music. Larson described it as "a fabricated reality meant to replace the random contours of life outside the app."

In an evocative metaphor for our collective algorithmic consumption, Larson wrote that "millions of users now sit side by side at the ledge of one great big trough of recorded music for the monthly price of a Chipotle burrito." It's a symbolic and literal devaluing of the medium; as low as that subscription price is, Spotify passes on little of it to actual artists. Before the advent of buffet-style streaming services and infinite feeds, the scarcity of a single vinyl record, cassette tape, or CD provided an incentive for a listener to get to know an artist's work, because otherwise the monetary investment in the music might not feel worth it. The promise of an algorithmic feed is that if the music becomes at all boring or tiresome, you can flip to the next song. That next recommendation will probably stick to the limits of your predetermined taste, and you won't have paid anything more for it.

I get the same feeling that Larson describes when I watch Netflix shows, especially when bingeing multiple episodes of a series at once. Sure, the shows are enjoyable—so enjoyable that I can't stop watching them. But I can't name many Netflix-produced shows that

have stuck with me. My personal streaming addiction is to food documentaries. I'll watch anything within that category: travel shows highlighting street food from different continents or a biopic that follows a Michelin-starred chef with copious B-roll of steaks hitting the grill. Given that few of these productions have charismatic individual hosts—their required presence would make it more difficult to manufacture episodes in high volume—they all blur together in my memory like one long screen saver. These shows are the equivalent of monotonous Instagram posts from tourist destinations—fodder for empty likes and thoughtless engagement, the endless reproduction of content.

It's not that such content can't be artful; the innovation of productions that Netflix acquired like *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* and the follow-up series *Chef's Table* was to focus on visual beauty above all, with soft-focus cameras trained on food close-ups. They translated the food porn of Instagram photos into television. Yet the artfulness was yoked to the need to be placid, undisruptive, and ambient—developing the audiovisual equivalent of perfect linen bedsheets. The productions inspire no thoughts, only sensory pleasure. Unlike the curation required in an art-house cinema or an independent video rental store to ensure that each offering stands on its own, the shows didn't have to provide meaningful one-off experiences; they could simply exist in bulk as a numbing narcotic.

Contrast the empty calories of ambient food documentaries with the rise of the Food Network cable channel in the 1990s and 2000s, which prompted the evolution of chef-celebrities and caused a sea change in the culture of home cooking. On streaming services, actual cooking shows are notably absent, as if they might encourage too much physical activity that would take away from time spent looking at a screen. What remains is pure, unproductive, hypnotic entertainment, because the core purpose is simply to have the viewers leave the service on as "active users." Netflix has gone so far as to produce replicas of its shows, set in different countries and using different languages. *Home for Christmas* began as a Norwegian miniseries about a single woman in the rural town of Røros trying to find a boyfriend before the holidays; it was remade almost shot by shot in the Italian *I Hate Christmas*, set in Chioggia—a cheap way to

double your content. Once a formula works, it is repeatable, or scalable, across Netflix's vast global audience, who end up unknowingly consuming the same material. The replicated show can be served to any possibly interested viewer via algorithmic recommendation.

Earlier in the streaming era, Netflix was infamous for its autoplay feature, which was introduced in its first form in 2016. When a TV episode or movie ended, a timer counted down ten seconds and then another show or film started, either the subsequent episode in the series or an algorithmically recommended alternative. In a 2019 post on the forum Hacker News, one Netflix engineer recalled that the original ten seconds caused "the biggest increase in hours watched"; five was too jarring and fifteen too slow. At the time, autoplay felt like a radical departure. Wasn't a TV episode simply supposed to stop? On cable, you'd usually have to wait a week for the next episode in a series. But since Netflix most often added entire television seasons at once, the feature all but mandated binge-watching. It also pushed users to coast along algorithmic lines of consumption, perhaps sticking to a given genre, like Jane Austen remakes or action movies featuring aliens, as it recommended one example after another. (Variety is a difficult concept for recommendation algorithms.)

After Netflix played three episodes in a row without the user stopping the autoplay function, or after ninety minutes of continuous watching, the app even stopped itself and a fateful message appeared on screen asking, "Are you still watching?" This feature persists today. In part, it was a safeguard against the service remaining on after the user fell asleep in front of the TV. The times that I encountered it, in the dim illumination of the living room at night or emanating from my laptop screen, I felt a tinge of embarrassment. It wasn't that I was asleep, it was just that I was watching way more TV than I usually did, one episode sliding implacably into the next before I had the willpower to stop it. Bingeing was something that the platform itself encouraged me to do, and yet the warning message implied that it was negative. By the 2020s, however, autoplay had become the norm via YouTube and TikTok: you would never expect a feed to end. All culture is now content, and the platforms we use to access it encourage us to treat it as interchangeable.

In 2007, Amazon launched Kindle Direct Publishing, a marketplace for eBooks, which were consumed on its new Kindle e-reader. Over time, KDP became a hub for self-published authors who circumvented the traditional hierarchy of agents, editors, and bookstores by going online, where new books were automatically recommended to readers using the same mechanisms as blouses or blenders in the Amazon store. The content that succeeded on KDP was a departure from what succeeded in the established literary world, too. It was a space for literature-as-content, where subject specificity and word volume far outweighed the opinions of critics. The more books an author produced, the better. According to one estimate, KDP offered over twelve million e-books in 2022. Amazon wasn't just controlling e-books; in 2019, its larger digital storefront made up three-quarters of online sales of new books for adults and almost half of all new book sales overall. In other words, much of literature is forced to move through Amazon's platform to reach consumers, which pressures books into particular forms—high-volume series confined to specific genre categories and released consistently over time in a drip of content—the same way a tweet has to be written to succeed in the Twitter feed.

The Stanford University professor Mark McGurl has studied how modernist literature evolved through the twentieth century, including tracking how the development of fiction MFA programs influenced mid-century novels. Novelists-turned-professors, taking jobs to support their writing practice, tutored their students at institutions like the Iowa Writers' Workshop, often pushing them toward a style of self-conscious literary realism from a personal perspective. Wendell Berry, Richard Ford, Michael Chabon, Rick Moody, and Tama Janowitz were some of the successes of the MFA-program model. Today, MFA programs still act as gatekeepers, helping publishers identify new talent and ushering novelists into the professionalized industry. The handpicked nature of such programs, and the insular, handshake nature of the publishing industry, maintain the ability to promote a singular or challenging artist—an act of tastemaking—though they are by nature somewhat elitist.

McGurl identified the looming homogeneity of MFA style. But algorithmic gatekeepers can come first. Young writers often find ways to cultivate public presences online even before they enter

MFA programs, on Twitter, Instagram, or TikTok. They subject their voices to the force of social media flattening. These pre-prepared personae might even help in competitive grad school applications. At each step of the process, a literary idea is tested for its ability to draw online engagement in a marketplace of attention.

McGurl now sees us entering into an Amazon era of literature, in which the company is an aesthetic as well as a commercial arbiter. It is "offering itself as the new platform of literary life," McGurl wrote in his 2021 book *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon.* The platform's measure of quality is quantity, the same ruthless metric of engagement as other algorithmic feeds. More purchases, and more pages read, meant that a book was better than its peers. Not only did a book cover have to be designed to be legible on a small screen, but the writing also had to be optimized for page turning, as it were—grabbing the reader's attention with each successive line. (This is a quality that good writing often has, of course, but not always.)

On one hand, this is a kind of democratization: Anyone can publish a book and give it a chance to be sold through the exact same channels, presented in the same way. There is no obstacle of a store's book buyer or the curation of a front table; just the math of the algorithm. The hyper-bestselling author Colleen Hoover provides an example of the opportunities. Hoover began by self-publishing her novels, which often fall into romance, thriller, and young-adult categories, on Amazon. The success of her first two led a mainstream publisher, Atria Books, to republish them in 2012, and her novels began to consistently hit bestseller lists. (Hoover stuck with self-publishing for her third novel, despite other offers.) During the pandemic, Hoover made eBooks of her backlist free—another strategy to boost digital engagement—and sparked a wave of fans on TikTok, where the nascent book community made tearful testaments to her writing's impact. Sales of her more than twenty books are estimated above twenty million copies, "more books than James Patterson and John Grisham combined," as *The New York Times* reported. The flywheel has accelerated even outside of Hoover's control: "I read other people's books, and I'm so envious. I'm thinking, Oh my God, these

are so much better, why are mine selling the way they are?" she told the *Times* in 2022.

On the other hand, the requirement of mass engagement is a departure from the history of literature, in which the opinions of editors and academics have mattered far more than how many copies of a book initially sells. The literary canon, McGurl wrote, is "a thing Amazon has no particular relation to at all except as a list of books that students tend to purchase." As filtered by the platform, "all fiction is genre fiction," he wrote, whether an experimental novel that took a decade to write or the fifth volume in an endless series of erotica eBooks. McGurl identified certain genres that found a successful home in Amazon's KDP marketplace. Romance books played well, including niche subgenres like "alpha billionaire romance," *Fifty Shades of Grey* being the most famous example, and "threesome MMF military." (It's not a coincidence the genre names themselves resemble search-engine optimization language.) Epics were another hit, including sprawling fantasy series.

At its most observable, the phenomenon of Amazon Literature is confined to a relatively small space: the digital storefront and the Kindle reader. Both are relegated to specific situations and might be particularly amenable to activities like reading guilty pleasures—on Kindle, no one can see the title of the book you're reading. It's easy enough to avoid the algorithmic influence and go to a physical bookstore, where a clerk might make a personal recommendation. Yet McGurl also linked the consumption habits that Amazon conditioned readers into with the rise of high-literary genres like 2010s autofiction—echelons of the publishing industry that were not seen as so algorithmic nor market-driven.

Autofiction is a genre "centering on a barely fictionalized writer-protagonist," McGurl wrote. Though it originated in France in the 1970s, coined by the theorist Serge Doubrosky, it came into vogue more recently with the success of novelists including Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, Rachel Cusk, and Karl Ove Knausgaard. Their work is connected by a close but ambiguous relationship between author and narrator: Is the "I" of Cusk's *Outline* trilogy of novels beginning in 2014 really Cusk herself, like a memoir, or are the narra-

tor and the events within pure fiction? The appeal comes from the voyeuristic tension of guessing which is which. Of course, readers are intimately familiar with this dynamic from social media, where other people present their lives and selves with varying degrees of truthfulness, whether in tweets or photos. Autofiction is a bit like an influencer's Instagram account: fragmented, non-narrative, and often deceptive.

Per McGurl's analysis, both Karl Ove Knausgaard and Rachel Cusk's autofiction novels came in series, offering readers a high volume of content, and presented a vicarious, almost consumerist view of the life of a successful writer. At times the books shade into a form of wish fulfillment, at least for their cultural-elite target audience. One buys the book as if one is buying the lifestyle of far-flung residencies and author panels, reading it as if watching a reality TV show. "I need the next volume like crack," Zadie Smith once wrote of *My Struggle*, the same thing you might say of a season of *Real Housewives*. I think Cusk and Knausgaard are two of the more interesting novelists of the twenty-first century, but I might unwittingly overlook the degree to which the seemingly avant-garde literary style masks their books' much more banal and mainstream content. Upon a recent reread, I was reminded of just how much of Cusk's *Transit*, the second in her *Outline* trilogy, consists of anecdotes about salon haircuts and home renovation. Is Cusk radically overhauling my relationship to narrative, or do I just wish I had a London flat to rebuild in a desirable neighborhood?

The point here is not that Knausgaard was paying attention to Instagram likes when he wrote about his youth in rural Norway. It's that algorithms have shaped the overall cultural landscape, conditioning our tastes. Everything exists within the algorithmic context of passive, frictionless consumption. No matter that a book or other piece of content seems to exist outside of the algorithmic ecosystem; it is still informed by the dominant aesthetics and trends that algorithmic feeds have given rise to. The end point of algorithmic culture is a constant flow of similar-yet-different content, varied enough so as not to be utterly boring but never disruptive enough to be alienating. Reaching toward an ambitious artistic ideal may have faded in favor of refinement toward the goal of likes and engagement above all.

Many popular cultural forms in the early twenty-first century seem to have been reduced to either narcotic mood enhancements or simplistic puzzles left for the viewer to solve and then move on to the next. This extends to even our largest productions. A film like the 2019 *Avengers: Endgame* was supposed to provide a capstone to many years of Marvel superhero films, the way that the original *Star Wars* ending once occupied the public imagination. Across its three-hour run time, much longer than the usual blockbuster, *Endgame* prioritized special effects and checking the boxes of fan trivia—you can spot your favorite superhero as they all return to fight the villain for the last time—over satisfying storytelling. Marvel devotees may have been pleased—*fanservice* is the term of art for content that overtly caters to hardcore fans' desires—but the end result is close to meaningless in terms of emotional impact or creative expression.

Rather than encouraging original artistic achievement, algorithmic feeds create the need for content that exists to generate more content: films that provide ready-made GIFs of climactic scenes to share on Twitter or TikTok and quippy lines that will inspire memes to serve as marketing. The need for engagement can encourage a capitulation to fanservice, or at least an attempt to do so.

The original *Game of Thrones* TV series fell prey to the same problem when it ended in 2019. Twenty million people watched the finale—one of the most-watched TV episodes ever. And yet it left many viewers cold. After many seasons of carefully developed character arcs, the final episodes seemed to throw established personalities out the window as Daenerys Targaryen turned evil and murderous. The royal maneuvering that the show recounted devolved into fantastical battles and dragons burning down CGI cities, spectacle surpassing plot. It may have looked good in clips shared on Twitter but it was nonsensical to watch. It's telling that the showrunners David Benioff and D. B. Weiss had to plot the finale themselves, since the novelist George R. R. Martin didn't finish the book series in time—perhaps another triumph of digital stream-

ing over literature. Lacking an internal vision, they chased what might play well online and provided tidy answers to the sprawling puzzle. Optimization didn't work for a narrative so individual as Martin's; despite the great expense that went into it, the final season became ephemeral content and faded out of viewers' minds seemingly overnight.

The first three novels by the Irish author Sally Rooney, currently upheld as a peak of Western millennial fiction, are a trilogy of romances that dramatize coming-of-age in moody Irish and continental European landscapes. They are atmospheric books, absorbing in their wealth of local detail and soothingly written in Rooney's simple, elegant, and yet somewhat cold prose. The novels witness their characters falling into and out of love, love that happens best in rare moments when it pierces the narcissism of the young self. They also heavily feature instant-message and email transcripts, the native communication medium of Rooney's characters. Reflecting our digital social lives so accurately is a strength of her novels. Alongside their vicarious entertainment value, they depict various social problems that became tentpoles of Twitter discourse when the books debuted, with pundits taking various sides of the topic at hand in their think pieces (in fact, Rooney was a debate-club star as a student herself). In *Conversations with Friends*, it was polyamory and self-harm. In *Normal People*, it was masochistic sexuality. In *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, it was economic class differences and literary fame itself, moving toward autofiction.

All three novels inspired debate over how physically attractive the characters were or should be, a fact that has to do with Rooney's gendered position as a female novelist but also the stories' fundamental basis in aesthetic pleasure: beauty often drives the narrative. Rooney's first two novels have also been transformed into literal streaming content in two television series coproduced by the BBC. The 2020 TV iteration of *Normal People* might be best interpreted as a series of softcore-pornographic GIF sets that would have been extremely popular on Tumblr had the platform not banned adult material in 2018. Rooney was on Twitter herself, as many millennial literati were, and was accustomed to the flow of discourse. She left the platform after she became too much of a public figure; she didn't want so many followers. Still, her novels are inextricable from their parallel existence online.

The cultural ecosystem of Filterworld puts the cart before the horse: The needs of promotion and marketing supersede the object that is meant to be promoted. Not only does culture have to be designed to generate external content to serve as marketing on digital platforms; the platforms also profit from the increased engagement driven by new content. It can be seen as either a symbiotic relationship or a vicious cycle, reinforcing the need to cater to the aesthetic requirements of the platform. Optimizing for this equation—second-guessing a creative process in advance—is much easier than finding an alternative to it. At this point, many pieces of contemporary culture have come to resemble or glorify the social platforms themselves—all the better to be distributed through them.

THE RISE OF INFLUENCERS

One streaming television show epitomized the flattening of culture in the algorithmic platform era. It debuted on Netflix in October of 2020, during a pandemic that still had most people the world over stuck in their homes with no other choice but to watch TV. Still, it was surprising how quickly the show came to dominate conversation (online, at least, where all nondomestic discussion was happening). *Emily in Paris* was the creation of Darren Star, the director and producer best known for the *Sex and the City* series, an intermittently glossy and gritty portrayal of Manhattan life in the late 1990s. *Emily in Paris* was originally meant for cable television but eventually landed at the streaming service, where the entire first season was available immediately to binge-watch.

A show both of and about social media, the titular Emily Cooper—played saccharine in the extreme by Lily Collins—is a woman in her early twenties from Chicago. She might be called "basic" for her job at a marketing firm, her long ponytail, and her habit of jogging around cities in athleisure. Emily heads to Paris to bring her American expertise to Savoir, a fictional agency that specializes in marketing luxury fashion brands. Specifically, it is Emily's job to train the staff on creating content for the Internet. Like a

well-meaning missionary, she disrupts the relative peace of French tradition—long lunches, print magazine ads, runway shows—and tries to convert the locals to Instagram posts instead.

In Star's *Sex and the City*, Carrie Bradshaw was a newspaper columnist who wrote about her dating exploits, shopping habits, and deep friendships—articles that were only hinted at in maudlin draft lines that appeared as she sat at her laptop. Bradshaw's role as a writer made her a productive part of culture: she was constructing a particular personal philosophy of life and love. Emily, by contrast, is simply a professional consumer. Her version of Carrie's writing is taking photos with her phone, which is a constant presence in the show.

In the first episode, she pulls it out and takes a selfie with the view from her *chambre de bonne*. Then a symbolic representation of her phone screen pops up within the camera's real-life frame. Emily posts the photo to an unnamed Instagram equivalent (to avoid copyright infringement), and her number of followers on the generic platform appears on screen. She changes her username from @emilycooper to @emilyinparis. Later in the same episode, she takes another Parisian selfie—her follower count has quadrupled, and then it jumps up again when she posts the image. She reacts to the number with bemused satisfaction. In the second episode, her followers have gone up by a factor of ten as she posts snapshots of a market. The number of likes and comments on her images spin upward like the wheels on a slot machine: she has hit the social media jackpot, acquiring strangers as intimate fans of her personal life.

This visual gimmick persists throughout the show as Emily takes yet more selfies, documents parties, and shows off outfits. Nothing new is created and no insight is imparted; the posts just rack up while the character progresses through her bildungsroman of accruing followers. Unlike, say, an art photographer laboriously framing a composition before pressing the shutter, the act of taking a photo for Instagram appears to be instantaneous and thoughtless for Emily. She just acts on instinct, already conditioned by her consumption of social media, transforming her life into optimized content in real time.

When I first watched the series, the way it visualized and valorized social media struck me as dystopian even as it was completely realistic. The specter of our online presences haunts every moment, causing us to constantly judge which scenes in our lives are worth broadcasting to our personal audiences, offering them up to the feed. Worse still, *Emily in Paris* glamorized the transformation of life into content, casting it as evidence of the protagonist's character development. Emily succeeds at Savoir because she is so expert at social media; there is no line between her professional labor, creating content for fashion brands, and her own sense of self, which is constructed through the same medium. She is a commercial brand of one, and happy because of it.

Beneath the show's smoothed-out surface are a range of buried assumptions. Emily's inherent privilege goes unremarked upon, as if it were simply a fact of life. She is white, extraordinarily thin, conventionally attractive, and always wearing heavy makeup. Considered out of context, she is a bizarre "hallucination of the normal," as the architect Rem Koolhaas wrote. Emily wears elaborate, expensive outfits—made more for photographing than walking around in—every day, without the show giving any hint of where the luxury clothing or the money to buy them came from. (It's as if Emily is a whimsical aristocrat, free to do whatever she pleases, which turns out to be posting online.) The rest of the cast is very white, too, from Emily's primary love interest to her boss and most of her colleagues. It's a poor depiction of an international city. But then, real Paris mostly functions as a backdrop for Emily's selfies.

During the first season, Emily becomes an influencer—the term for a person known not for any great creative feat but for the number of their followers and their ability to inspire likes online. The character eventually gets included in deals to promote Savoir's clients, a victory presented as worth celebrating the way that a band signing to a record label or an author getting a book deal once was. Marketing has taken the place of creation in the same way that conforming to the algorithmic feed has taken the place of creative self-expression—neither is particularly concerned with originality. *Emily in Paris* is cognizant of how life has been taken over by social media feeds and the need for any piece of culture—fashion

line, retail store, public art installation—to spark content creation. The show documents our flattened culture without critiquing it; rather, it accelerates the flattening. By season three, every major plot point seemed to resolve in an Instagram post, and several episodes had blatant product placement from real-life brands, including McDonald's, McLaren, and AMI Paris: the show's fictional marketing became literal marketing.

That the show celebrated being an influencer made a kind of sense; in 2022, a United States survey found that 54 percent of the respondents, ages thirteen to thirty-eight, would become influencers if given the opportunity. Another survey of three thousand children in 2019 found that 30 percent of them would choose to be a YouTuber—another kind of influencer—over other careers like professional athlete, musician, and astronaut. In the 2010s, the figure of the influencer was both invented and metastasized, becoming perhaps the single dominant protagonist of the cultural landscape. After all, if the bulk of culture now takes place on social media, what more powerful role could there be than controlling the flow of attention and being able to direct an audience in particular ways? (Influencers are the cowboys of algorithms.)

The superficiality of the word itself is indicative: "influence" is never the end point, only a means of communicating a particular message. An influencer is easiest to define by how they make money. Like a media company producing magazines or podcasts, they sell advertising shown to the audiences that they have gathered. But the content that draws the audiences in in the first place is most often the influencer's personal life, their aesthetically appealing surroundings (as well as aesthetically appealing selves) and entertaining activities. The material of their lives—in varying degrees of organic and staged—is copiously documented on social media platforms like Instagram, where they also publish sponsored posts for brands. Another difference is that unlike a free newspaper distributed on the street or a radio station sending out a signal, influencers don't own the infrastructure of their medium. They piggyback on the digital platforms' ability to distribute content, both through widely installed smartphone apps and througb in-app feeds.

Fascination with a person, particularly their appearance or personal life, smoothing the way to self-promotion began long before the Internet era. Historically it shows up most often in the confines of a royal court or an urban intelligentsia, where members in geographical proximity observed each other with as much daily scrutiny as we post on Instagram today. Ninon de L'Enclos was born into a wealthy family in Paris in 1620; after her father was exiled and her mother died, she was left to make a life on her own, and she committed to never marrying. She became a courtesan with a succession of noble lovers, as well as an author and anti-religious philosopher. In one particularly dramatic episode, she broke up with a long-term lover in the countryside and moved back to Paris. Her ex, the Marquis de Villarceaux, promptly moved into a house across the street to spy on her, watching for new visitors. To mollify him, she chopped off a length of her hair to send to him as a parting gift. It worked, but also launched a mania for copycat bob haircuts, called "cheveux à la Ninon," as Betsy Prioleau recounts in her book *Seductress*. It was a hairdressing meme from a consummate influencer.

Later, in 1882, the British socialite and actor Lillie Langtry became the first celebrity to endorse a product when she became the face of Pears Soaps, her portrait reproduced on advertising. Langtry was known for her bright white complexion, likely more hereditary than an effect of the soap, but her personal image lent authority to the ads. In fact, Langtry had become famous through the reproduction of her image, first by prominent British painters and then in sketches printed on postcards. When reproduction was so scarce, its very fact could stand in for approval—the proliferation of an image the equivalent of a like.

Consumers have always cared about the lifestyle decisions of celebrities famous for something else: the actor's diet regimen, the tycoon's racehorses, the painter's affairs. Fame—which could also be defined as attention—casts its own aura, making just about anything interesting. In the 1960s, Andy Warhol took the banality of fame to its end point with his group of "Superstars." For Warhol's "Screen Test" series in the early 1960s, a set of countercultural characters, not well known outside of their milieu, posed in front of a video camera for extended durations, the lens simply observing their faces, like an audition for a nonexistent film. (Today, they bring to

mind rehearsals for selfies or the moments before a front-facing video is recorded for TikTok.) The videos demonstrate that we need do nothing more than gaze at someone to feel as though they are important—the framing of the camera lens and the projector casts a spell.

The computer or phone screen accomplishes the same feat: anyone within a TikTok feed appears just as famous as everyone else, another form of flattening. Warhol once said, "In the future everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes." In 1991, the musician and online blogging pioneer Momus presciently updated the prediction to "In the future everyone will be famous for 15 people." On social media, that has simply become fact. Every user is famous to their followers.

The influencer is something of a successor to the blogger, the star of the nascent mainstream Internet in the 2000s. Bloggers similarly used digital tools to self-publish and dramatize their personal lives in running textual dispatches—the wave of "mommy bloggers" starting around 2002 foremost among them. Bloggers sold advertising, too, in the form of sponsored posts and banner ads that appeared on the borders of their websites. According to Google's trend tracker, which documents the popularity of search terms, "blogger" has been on a slow slide downward since 2011, while "influencer" emerged in strength around the beginning of 2016. That was also when Instagram passed five hundred million users and social-network feeds were generally becoming more algorithmic. Instagram offered a perfect venue for the influencer: no voluminous writing or emotional disclosure of the self were required. Glossy images alone were enough to attract a following that could later be monetized. Where the term *blogger* described a literal activity of writing, "influencing" is closer to the financial side of what's going on. It's a sales job, convincing audiences to buy something, first a vision of aspirational lifestyle and then the products that make it up.

Patrick Janelle is something of a real-life version of Netflix's Emily Cooper, though his career as an influencer started long before hers. In the early to mid-2010s, he turned his life into content and gradually built a career, and then businesses, from it. Though it's

no longer his primary focus, his Instagram account today still has over four hundred thousand followers and over six thousand images from a decade of use under the approachable account name @aguynamedpatrick. His posts resemble photo shoots from a men's magazine like *GQ*: palatial hotel rooms, airy coffee shops, the art-bedecked walls of his well-furnished Manhattan apartment, all starring the ruggedly handsome Janelle as the main character. Crisp, clear, and geometrically composed, all the photos are taken by Janelle himself with an iPhone, sometimes with the help of a remote trigger. His life wasn't always so manicured, however, particularly when he got on Instagram in 2012.

I first met Janelle years ago at The Dutch, a restaurant he suggested on a corner in SoHo near his apartment. It was outfitted with the requisite orb pendant lamps and open shelving. The restaurant was something of a headquarters for Janelle, who even featured it on his website. In 2011, he had just turned thirty, moved to New York, and taken a freelance gig as a designer at the food magazine *Bon Appétit*. Instagram became a way to share his life with friends, both from his travels abroad and back where he grew up in Colorado. "The medium was built for documenting your life," he told me. He had the placid confidence of a professional model. Frequenting Manhattan cafés before magazine work, Janelle started an Instagram hashtag, #dailycortado, referring to the short cappuccino that was a favorite of coffee aficionados at the time. Every day, he would take a photo of his latte-art-topped coffee resting on a marble or wood table—artisanal surfaces that also happened to contrast nicely with a smooth porcelain coffee cup—and post it on Instagram. The materials were signs of expense and quality; their naturalness and texture created a compelling contrast with the slick flatness of the smartphone screen, though the photographs were so much digital fodder, too.

Janelle was one of the pioneers of this aesthetic on Instagram, helping to firmly embed it as the signal of tasteful generic café design. He also popularized that hashtag for other people to use, inviting participation as any good meme does. A decade later, #dailycortado is still active, part of the bedrock of the platform. Now, it's included

in lists of hashtags that users pile into captions so that more people can discover their accounts, goosing the algorithm to recommend the photo to coffee fans.

If we look back at the photos, they have a paradoxical quality. Janelle was capturing a moment of slowing down and paying attention: when you set down your coffee cup, sit down, and appreciate it for a split second before drinking. It's a restful moment in bustling city life; you stay still while everyone else on the street careens by. And yet each Instagram post feeds the beast of the feed, which sends as much content as possible by your eyes as fast as possible—the opposite of slowing down. Instead, the photo is a vector for acceleration, both for content consumption and the expansion of Janelle's online footprint, the audience that makes him money as an influencer. Janelle can slow down, but only to take the perfectly composed photo, and his viewers can perhaps vicariously slow down for a moment before the feed sweeps their attention on to yet more stimulation.

"In the beginning it was just coffee, and images I would see that were just visually pleasing; it was about being in the city," Janelle said of his early Instagram use. His posts were drawn from the vocabulary of street photography: fire escapes, building facades, milling crowds. But over time, and with the booming popularity of Instagram and influencers, his aspirational photos of city living became a way to achieve that same lifestyle. Images of luxury led him into luxury situations. "Lifestyle begot lifestyle," he told me. "As I continued to post, I was able to become more in demand as a participant in things, having more access to opportunities, building out a brand financially." His personal fashion sense, shown off in selfies, led to a promotional deal with Ralph Lauren. A vacation that he posted led to offers of free hotel rooms.

Influencing became a career, though Janelle dislikes words like "tastemaker." "I don't think I'm creating it, making the taste, but I am selecting the things I think are new and exciting, documenting them," he said. In 2014, the Council of Fashion Designers of America named Janelle its first "Instagrammer of the Year." I found Janelle one day in 2015 on my Instagram Explore page, which collected algorithmic recommendations of posts to like or accounts

to follow. My guess is that I was following enough New York City restaurants and interior design inspiration accounts, filled with downtown lofts and mid-century furniture, that Janelle's account slotted squarely into my perceived taste, at least according to the algorithm.

I was also entering my late twenties as a Brooklyn resident and looking for some definition of what adult life should look like—in essence, how and where to spend the little extra money I had. Janelle's composed and curated photos gave a hint of that, though his evolving persona as a luxury-focused gadabout was less relatable than his street-scene snapshots. Instagram also lent a veneer of authenticity to such lifestyle content that a print magazine produced by a media corporation wouldn't have had for me—though his posts were corporate in a different way, since they were filtered through Instagram as a tech company. "I understand that I'm an aspirational figure," Janelle told me. "By me putting up an image and giving it some exposure to an audience, I'm implicitly saying, 'I endorse this.' I want to sort of jump-start people into creating for themselves the best life possible."

There's a persistent issue of class throughout Janelle's path: He enacts upper-class consumerist tropes and in doing so achieves them, reinforcing their status signaling, as many influencers do. (Influencing runs on jealousy.) White, traditionally attractive, and thin, Janelle was able to easily inhabit the luxurious imagery he made for himself. In a way, he was primed for algorithmic exposure because his appearance was so acceptable, fitting within the established visual vocabulary of urban wealth. Even as Janelle was gaining followers, others found their accounts throttled by the recommendation algorithm or blocked by aggressive censorship: activists posting political agitation memes, sex workers promoting themselves, and women who wanted to be as topless on Instagram as Janelle often was (a discrepancy that inspired the Free the Nipple campaign).

Over the years, Janelle has become something of a historical figure as the march of social media has passed him on. His Instagram following peaked in the 2010s, which is when his aesthetic feels frozen: it was the era of faux-industrial restaurants with ampersands in the name, arduously mixed craft cocktails, and preppily neat men's

fashion (everyone looked like a lumberjack attending a wedding). In fact, Janelle cites a retrospective turning point in his relationship with Instagram, though he is still quite active there: 2016, when its feed changed from chronological to algorithmic.

"For me, personally, in the way that I grew through social media, the change of the platform to give power to the algorithm was worst possible thing," he told me. Originally, he could post several times a day and know that his posts would reach his followers in real time, in a chronological order that made sense for his storytelling. Now he can't tell when or in what order his images will show up. It's frustrating on the consumption side as well as creation: "No one is really given that choice to make that decision for themselves, to curate what they're seeing in a way that feels great to them. It's all being dictated by the algorithm."

Instagram shifted formats over the years, too, moving away from a feed of still images and adding stories, for ephemeral posts that mimicked Snapchat; Instagram TV, for longer videos; and eventually Reels, for short videos to copy TikTok. The app gradually lost its identity as a relatively austere space for expressing your own taste. "At no point were these decisions made to make the platform a better place for the people creating the content," Janelle said. "They were purely decisions made by the growth team and by the business team to figure out how they could expand."

The ever-shifting nature of Instagram's design means it is almost impossible to experience Janelle's work in the context in which it originally existed. You can't rewind time and see how the account was presented in 2015, for example, on the grid or in the timeline. Digital platforms lack the kind of stability that is vital for the longevity of culture, the way you might see a photographer's decades-old film negatives displayed in a museum. Context is swept away as the companies change priorities. "Not only are things changing in the moment, but because all of this is digital, it could be changed retroactively, because we don't own the thing. We have no control over how it's presented or used at all," Janelle said. The Instagram feed changed from solely square images to any size, and then began including videos that clashed with still photographs, all in the name

of competing to deliver more compelling content, faster and more personalized.

Janelle became disaffected with Instagram but also didn't want to switch to newer alternatives like TikTok—a game of hopscotch that is often required to survive in the current influencer economy. He knew TikTok might offer better business opportunities, but it also would have taken up too much of his creative energy. (Still, the gravity of the latest feed might be irresistible: months after we spoke, he began tentatively posting TikTok videos and accruing followers there, too.) The constant need to figure out the next big social media platform is reminiscent of early silent-film stars trying to make the switch to talkies in the early twentieth century, or theater actors moving to television: not everyone made it, and not everyone's artistic approach functioned in the new medium.

The need to pivot now happens every few years (if not annually) instead of decades and requires a stronger sensitivity to technological bullshit. You must know when to avoid the total duds, like the short-lived mobile video streaming service Quibi (short for "quick bites"), which drew few users despite its high-budget content and shut down after less than a year. Much of the hype doesn't pan out, and any effort an influencer invests in a failed platform is lost.

Janelle is a savvy entrepreneur. Fads shift quickly in Filterworld, so rather than continually adapting his own content to whichever formats feeds favored, he built a company called Untitled Secret that represents a dozen other influencers and coordinates marketing deals with corporate clients, helped by a growing staff. He influences the influencers.

While the overall industrial-chic vibe of the 2010s that Janelle espoused is still very prevalent, cutting-edge taste has moved on to the messier and more chaotic, even the aggressively inauthentic. Influencers now regularly have millions of followers, a scale at which personal connection is barely possible, replicating the remove of traditional celebrity. Kardashian-style reality television ushered in a new class of influencer who moved smoothly between the small screen and the even smaller one of phones: You could watch Kim on TV and then follow her on Instagram, where she now has 349 mil-

lion followers, the population of a dispersed nation of fans. Unlike Janelle's case, Instagram wasn't the source of Kardashian fame so much as just another container for it. Preexisting fame is the best way to kick-start algorithmic promotion, which further enhances it.

While the early promise of social media was to connect users to their actual friends, over time inauthenticity became something to embrace. In 2016, Trevor McFedries and Sara DeCou, cofounders of a technology company called Brud, created an Instagram account named @lilmiquela (Little Miquela). The account's bio described a Brazilian American nineteen-year-old, and its images were the standard Instagram fare: casual selfies, snapshots with friends, and posed portraits in front of city walls. Miquela's aesthetic was generic influencer, the average of successful accounts before her. She was generic, too: not a human but a computer rendering.

Her skin was waxy and inhumanly smooth, glowing from within. Her eyes were strangely blank. Nevertheless, she appeared next to real people, dressed in real clothes, in real places. The essence of the account is a virtual three-dimensional model, a nigh-photorealistic digital doll that can be posed any conceivable way. The glossy imagery, only slightly faker than most fashion shoots, proved successful: she made headlines as the first famous "virtual influencer" and signed up with the talent agency WME (or, at least, her creators did). Miquela currently has nearly three million Instagram followers and, like any successful influencer, does promotional deals with luxury fashion brands like Calvin Klein and Prada.

That she doesn't exist makes her influence more salable, because there is no human being with an independent personality to stand in the way of the advertising. Miquela won't feel alienated by changes in the feed, as Patrick Janelle did, or fail to adapt to the next big multimedia format. She will also stay nineteen forever—until it becomes more profitable for her to suddenly age into a new demographic. And when the account has outlived its relevance, it can simply shut down and develop a new persona. This is another consequence of content's interchangeability as the feeds grow larger and faster: we don't necessarily notice when one source of content is swapped out for another. The aura of intimacy that once drove

social media users to people like Patrick Janelle is now cultivated for entirely imaginary characters. If influencers' lives were already tinged with fiction—glitzed up with sponsored travel and gifted outfits, the deals undisclosed as if they happened naturally—then the influencers have since become fictional themselves, like the cartoon mascots of cereal brands.

The influencer identity has been both professionalized and dispersed. There is a viable career path in catering to the feed, accruing followers, and selling access to your personal audience. Charli D'Amelio, a relatively unremarkable teenage dancer living in suburban Connecticut, joined TikTok in May 2019, when the social network was mostly oriented around lip-synching and dancing videos. By jumping on trends and participating in choreography memes, D'Amelio now has over 150 million followers, perhaps the fastest rise of a once-obscure social media account ever, thanks to TikTok's algorithmic feed. Over just a few years, D'Amelio went from minor social media star to fully mainstream celebrity, even dating a tertiary member of the Kardashian clan in a crossover worthy of cable sitcoms.

Individual influencers are less remarkable in this decade also because so many users of digital platforms are pressured to act like influencers themselves, constantly creating content, accruing an audience, and figuring out ways to monetize it—either immediately through literal advertising or more gradually through the attention of their peers. We are all influencers: the visual artist trying to get the attention of galleries or curators on Instagram; the novelist documenting their writing process with a litany of tweets; the amateur baker making bread TikTok videos and replying to comments as they try to build a business out of their apartment. There are dating influencers and personal finance influencers. For so many career paths in Filterworld, following the demands of various feeds has become an almost unavoidable commandment. The pressure is so great that the promotional content has a way of superseding the actual craft.